

Culture in the Service of Politics in Greece

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Abstract: This assignment examines the celebration of the National Day of Palygenesis (25th of March) in Greece as presented by the Interwar press through 34 newspaper articles. The potential differentiations between the official celebration and its coverage by the press are being examined and an attempt is being made to relate them to the political promulgation. This piece of work takes into account the political-ideological perspective along with the individualities that characterize the mannerism in the specific period. The first year chosen is 1924, when the celebration of March 25th coincided with the proclamation of the Second Hellenic Republic and the abolition of the Kingdom. 8 years later, in 1932, a new landmark is introduced in the capital, denoting the new state concept of celebrating national celebrations: the Monument to the Unknown Soldier. At the same time, the perspective and dominance of communists and anti-communist factions in the national holiday have been examined in Macedonia. 8 years later, Iohannis Metaxas' dictatorship has been fully established by creating new protagonists and symbolisms in national anniversaries. On these three dates the celebration of the national anniversary, the promotion of the past and its cultural connotation could have special meanings linked to the political events.

Key words: Greece, Interwar period, public events, national celebrations and festivals

1. Introduction

The purpose of this proposal is to elaborate and examine the celebration of the National Celebration of Palingenesis as preserved in Interwar newspaper articles referring to the national holiday, and the official ceremonies taking place. Different perspectives and goals of the state are under scrutiny, the possible differences in the official celebration as well as in its coverage by the press and an attempt is made to correlate them to the political context of the time. The article mainly considers the political conditions and the mindset of each government as well as the political-ideological origins of each report which the information have been extracted from. The following newspapers *Η Βραδυνή* and *Μακεδονία* were chosen, the first for its popularity, pro-royalty readership and the second as the contrasting side which is the oldest newspaper in Northern Greece with a plethora of archives, ideologically positioned in the centrist progressive side (Δούλος, 2003).

2. March 25, 1924: The Annunciation of the “Kingless’ Republic”

The political time at the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century in Greece is densely oriented. The electoral victory of the Concervative Party (Λαϊκό Κόμμα), the return of the King Constantine I, the collapse and

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defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor, the revolutionary movement of 9/11 and the Revolutionary Government demanding and achieving the resignation of the king, the traumatic forced exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece result in the proclamation of the Kingless Democracy by the Government of Al. Papanastasiou (12/3/1924-24-7-1924). The change of state is formalized by a resolution of the Hellenic Parliament on March 25, 1924: certainly the choice of date is not accidental. Just as the first King of Greece, Otto I, had decided the official celebration of the Greek Revolution on March 25th in order to celebrate the Annunciation of Holy Mary with the Greek Revolution against Ottoman empire, so the Prime Minister Alexandros Papanastasiou tries to interrelate the national holiday of the Palingenesis to the rebirth of the Republic in the country.

A day before the eve of the holiday, *H Βραδυνή* hosts a short article about the consultation between Theodoros Pagalos and the Minister of the Interior Policy Panagiotis Aravantinos for the ceremony of declaring the Republic and for maintaining order: the priority is given to the political situation and not to the national holiday, while the military leader -and not the political one- is said to be the regulator of the ceremony (*H Βραδυνή*, 1924a).

The next day there is information about the official celebration of March 25th with the formation and parade of soldiers and military troops in the Cathedral of Athens into the central streets. In the same column and with a smaller subtitle, the celebration of the Republic by the army is mentioned: the attempt to associate the events with the military power is obvious, as if the celebration does not approve the sympathy of the citizens but the support of the military factions (*H Βραδυνή*, 1924b).

In this reasoning, we pinpoint a report about the reactions of the politicians, the statement of the President of the Constitutional League, Georgios Manousopoulos, with which he calls on the world “... *to leave the desperate faction alone to carry out its work, the work of burying the Greek homeland. The citizens must ‘close themselves’ in their house and remain in it throughout the day, as they would do on a day of great national calamity*” (*H Βραδυνή*, 1924c). The absence of citizens from the events indicates rejection and the newspaper urges it so that the people do not legitimize the changes of state.

The public's aversion to this celebration is reflected in the main front-page opinion article on 3-25-1924. The editor considers that the people abhor the celebration as a celebration of the State and Violence and not as a celebration of freedom. He also considers as crucial a new national celebration in which the personal, individual freedom, which that year is trampled upon, will be celebrated. The only consolation for the royalist readership is the existence of the heroes of 1821 who carry on spreading the messages of struggle and freedom: the use of the historic past leads to translating the national struggle into a struggle against state oppression (*H Βραδυνή*, 1924d).

In the second edition, the newspaper talks about the celebration of the day. Due to the political conditions after the ceremony in the Cathedral, where Greek politicians, ambassadors of foreign countries (but also representatives of the refugees) were present, the political world was relocated to the Parliament, the most important place concerning that day, where the Second Hellenic Republic was declared by resolution. A typical characteristic is the removal of the crown from the quotients of the military either before line-up in the Cathedral or in the barracks, as the act certifies the change of state. Special reference is given to the celebration of the anniversary in the camps, while the religious-national character of the day recedes, to emphasize the state change supported by the army, the regulator of Greek political situations after the Disaster in Asia Minor.

In Thessaloniki, far away from the political events at the capital city, the newspaper *Μακεδονία* highlights the background of the celebration of the two events on 24-3-1924. It mentions that there is a thought that the vote of confidence in the new government after its election statements should be followed by the proclamation of the

Republic, and then the members of the Parliament should go to the Cathedral, where they will attend the ceremony of Annunciation of Holy Mary (*Μακεδονία*, 1924a). This is how the triptych of Legitimization of Government-Declaration of Democracy-National Day is structured through the celebration, which is inextricably linked to national, political and state data.

On March 25, the newspaper hosts an editorial by its director, Aristos Peridis who he equates the celebration of the National Palingenesis with the celebration of Democracy (Περίδης, 1924). Declaring the dominance of the change of state is the front-page article of the newspaper entitled “HOLY DAY...” which analyzes the change of state, selectively relates it to the national holiday and does not mention a single word about the Annunciation of the Virgin (*Μακεδονία*, 1924b). In the celebration of the double celebration (national and political) which will take place with a ceremony in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, military, political and municipal rulers, students, and all civil servants participate: the largest possible participation of society in the celebration is requested as proof acceptance of political changes (*Μακεδονία*, 1924c).

The following day, the readers of the newspaper are informed that “Yesterday the people took to the streets to celebrate the anniversary of the National and State Palingenesis” (emphasis ours), a term that clearly reflects the fusion of the historical with the political event. In general, the national holiday followed the expected formality in the co-capital with cannon fires, the presence of foreign diplomats, the Israeli and Armenian communities of the city at the Doxology in the church of Hagia Sophia, followed by a reception at the City Hall (*Μακεδονία*, 1924d).

3. March 25, 1932: Nationalist Greece Celebrates

In 1932, in March in particular, Greece of economic impasses is celebrating the National Palingesia. The newspaper *H. Βραδυνή*, a day before the eve of the holiday, with a photo on its front page, informs about what will take place the next day and gives the vital place of the celebration in Athens: the Monument to the Unknown Soldier with its inauguration ceremony (H. Βραδυνή, 1932a).

In a report on the 5th page, there is a reference to the typical cannon fires from Lycabettus, the illumination of the Acropolis, etc., but the main symbolic place is the new Monument, where the officials will attend the parade. The new pilgrimage site of Hellenism will gather students, soldiers, politicians, and private factions with a strict array: the symbol of the fallen Greek soldier on the battlefield receives approval of all ages and social ranks.

The laying of wreaths at the Memorial is an open process as “*The 1st Army Corps [...] requests those interested to register by 6:00 p.m. of today*”. What is new is that the Doxology will not take place in the Cathedral but in the Monument, showing that the need to impose the Monument and its symbolism alters the order and place of the actions: the Unknown Soldier overtakes the named heroes of the Revolution and the Annunciation of Holy Mary, which had the lion’s share until then (*H Βραδυνή*, 1932b).

The day of the Annunciation begins with the firing of cannons and the parade of army musicians in central streets in Athens accompanied by marching bands. The opening ceremony of the Monument was attended by the President of the Republic, the Deputy Prime Minister, members of Greek Parliament and a number of political, academic and military authorities, while the President of the Government was absent, probably fearing incidents to his detriment (H. Βραδυνή, 1932d) but also expected reactions from communists (*H Βραδυνή*, 1932c).

Of interest is a front-page leaflet on March 26 where Takis Barlas comments on the indifferent participation of the world. The pamphleteer observes formality and lack of emotion by contrasting it with the enthusiastic events of the past. The images he composes show that the use of symbols and the grandeur of the King’s

procession to the Cathedral deeply impressed the crowd, while the current political and state situation deprived the nation of its power by removing its symbols. The function of the parade as a sign of national power is clear in the text, while the colorful, multicultural crowd that cheers the King and seeks the Conquest of Constantinople shows that 10 years after the Catastrophe in Asia Minor, the Great Idea evokes nostalgia to people (Μπάρλας, 1932).

However, the Athenian newspaper notes two important events in the co-capital's celebrations. The first concerns incidents by communists who disapproved of army units in the parade and caused damage in Thessaloniki to shops with images of heroes of the Greek Revolution (*H Βραδυνή*, 1932e). The second incident concerns disapproval from reserve officers and members of the anti-communist Union who did not receive an official invitation to the national holiday because of their reaction against Prime Minister, Eleytherios Venizelos (*H Βραδυνή*, 1932f). Thessaloniki is in a turmoil.

This disorder and confusion are described by *Μακεδονία* in its pages. On 24-3-1932, the newspaper presents with official registration the program of the Municipality which includes the Doxology in the Cathedral with the presence of the military, political and intellectual authorities of the city of Thessaloniki along with the presidency of economic and social unions (*Μακεδονία*, 1932a). On the same page, the National Union of Greece (E.E.E.), an anti-Semitic nationalist organization, with the anti-communist traits during the interwar period (Τσιρώνης, 2002) “[...] invites [...] and values the presence of all brotherhoods” to parade with their uniforms and war medals at the Palingenesis festival (*Μακεδονία*, 1932b).

On March 25th, a special edition of the newspaper is released where its title recalls the National Anthem as “sacred bones of the Greeks which Freedom came from” appears, according to the national poet Dionisius Solomos. Under the macabre title there is a picture of the bishop of Palaion Patras Germanos blessing the banner of the revolution, and opinion articles with a dominant anti-communist spirit. Recipients of in a front-page opinion article by V. Katopodis praise and hymns are given to the bishop of Palaion Patron Germanos, to Rigas Feraios, to Kolokotronis. At their side, the chieftains Pappas, Zafirakis, Balanos are placed, so that the local heroic pantheon will emerge equal to that of “old” Greece (Κατοπόδης, 1932). On the 3rd page there are extensive illustrated encyclopedia articles on Lord Byron, Athanasios Diakos and Anfreas Miaoulis, while a column article shows the difference between the French and Greek Revolutions: the Greek revolution did not arise from enlightenment or class struggle but as a continuation of Byzantium which preserved the nation and the religion (Skaltsas, 1932). The article clearly attempts to eradicate class characteristics from the Greek Revolution, emphasizing more the common religious characteristics of the Greeks. Thus, the national holiday is added in its absence to the anti-communist arsenal of the interwar period.

And while *H Βραδυνή* reported conflicts and incidents from the exclusion of National Union Greece (EEE) members and retired non-commissioned officers, “Lohengrin” in the permanent column “At the Moment” looks forward to the parade of steelheads and hopeful members of the E.E.E. (*Μακεδονία*, 1932c). Likewise, the Union of Reserve Non-Commissioned Officers of Northern Greece is called to a gathering at the Association's offices so that they can attend the ceremony at the Church: the parade as a symbol and proof of a dynamic presence in both gatherings is prominent (*Μακεδονία*, 1932d).

The next day there is a report of the celebration. The official celebration took place in the Cathedral and the City Hall with several authorities as well as representatives of specific social-political groups: Armenians, Jews, war invalids, widows and orphans from the community of refugee and also members of the E.E.E. comprise the crowd of officially invited guests, the multi-cultural character of the city (*Μακεδονία*, 1932e). (On the contrary, the absence of the civil servants and the policemen in the village Stavros in Halkidiki is criticized: the world of the

small community considers as crucial the presence of symbols of state power at the national holiday (*Μακεδονία*, 1932e)). The newspaper, however, selectively presents on its front page two photos from the E.E.E. parade. and of the National University Student Union (E.P.E.) framing them with captions referring to the enthusiastic welcome that the world gave them: the different between the indifferent crowd of the capital and the enthusiastic crowd of the co-capital shows the different perspective of the newspapers but also their different targeting.

The important fact is that in Thessaloniki in 1932 the “Communists [...] desecrated the celebration of March 25th. But they were punished by the nationalists” (*Μακεδονία*, 1932g). Members of the communist party allegedly took advantage of the parade to distribute propaganda material and hang banners and flags, while at the intersection of Venizelou-Tsimiski streets they destroyed a shop window depicting a scene from the Independence War. The perpetrators were searched by a joint team of reserve officers and members of the E.E.E. who carried out reprisals, until the police intervened. In this way, the official celebration becomes a “tool” for events/demonstrations against the state and the official ideology, but also a means of demonstrating power through parades by unsolicited battalions of “outraged” nationalists who at the same time guard the order and safety of the parade (*Μακεδονία*, 1932g).

4. March 25, 1940: The National Renaissance of the Third Greek Civilization

The dictatorship of Iohannis Metaxas in Greece in 1940 promotes an ethno-patriotism that seeks celebrations and events as a means of projecting the power of the army and highlighting the active role of the Youth in events that the newspaper *I Vradini* exalts. EON, the National Organization of Youth, is leading the events dominated by the symbolic march of the youth from Agia Lavra on the eve of March 25 to lay laurels to the Unknown Soldier. On the same day, students will crown the statues of fighters, Philhellenes and of the “soldier” King Constantine I who after the return of the Kingdom is “restored” to his pedestal (*Η Βραδυνή*, 1940a).

On the day of the holiday, *Η Βραδυνή* presents a perfect photomontage where King George II and I. Metaxas, symbols of political authority, dominate the front page with the Greek flag which is the symbol of the nation that is in the background. An extensive report is made on a ceremony in Agia Lavra where the EON flag was blessed (corresponding to the banner of the Revolution of 1821) and from where a march of young people bearing laurels began that ended at the Monument to the Unknown Soldier, a march connecting the Present with the Past. This event (in addition to the recognition of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier as a place for national events) also shows the recovery of the religious element: the Monastery-cradle of the Greek Revolution restores the active role of the Church. The Church blessing the banner of the Youth and, as a result, the Monastery became the starting point of the path to modern Greece (*Η Βραδυνή*, 1940b).

In the same report there is a reference to the role of the Great Bishop of Palaion Patron Germanos, to traditional uniforms and guns, to traditional folk songs that accompanied the young runner. The arrival of the laureate man at the Monument to the Unknown Soldier is described, escorted honorably by 12 phalangists “greeting in a Greek manner, with the right hand raised” now when the crowd chanting “Father-Father” invites Metaxas to attend the ceremony. The laying of the laurel branch is followed by the Hymn to the Unknown Soldier, written especially for the ceremony. At the end the National Anthem is sung since, as the columnist argues, the two revolutions, the National Palingenesis and the Revolution of 4th of August (the day that the dictatorship started), are identical. Thus the Palingenesis of 1821 serves the state power by linking it to the militant Greek tradition that the dictator Metaxas’ regime ardently desired to usurp. Additionally, front-page articles about the

fighting prowess of the Greek Army and its perfect equipment together with photographs of the King and the Crown Prince (*H Βραδυνή*, 1940d) stimulate the psychology of the crowd, a few months before Greece's entry into the war.

Furthermore, in a long article about the "spontaneous" participation of the crowd, the presence of women is impressive as female members of Metaxas political party, female workers and schoolgirls are presented in photographs from events (*H Βραδυνή*, 1940c). In the same article we watch a crowd of officials (military "in uniform", representatives of religious denominations, judges, union leaders, etc.) paying respects to the heroes of the day, attending the Doxology for the official celebration Independence Day. There have been also cannon fires, military marches accompanied by military music bands and many military unit in front of the Cathedral and at the crossing points of the royal procession, since the kingship has been restored. At the end, the military parade with hikers, motor and airplane sections adds to the excitement of the crowd: the same newspaper that accused the crowd of indifference to the 1932 events, now enthusiastically notes the crowds "spontaneously" participating in the festivities.

In Thessaloniki, the celebration of March 25, 1940 is not distinguished for its distinctiveness or originality. The newspaper *Μακεδονία* on the eve of the national holiday refers to the Doxology at the Metropolitan Cathedral, the reception at the Industry Chamber and the army parades on the morning of March 25, while the EON and veteran warriors will parade in the afternoon of the same day. It is worth noting that the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki participates in the celebration with a Doxology in its Synagogue. It is also remarkable that the course of the laurels from Agia Lavra to the Monument of the Unknown Soldier is described in detail (*Μακεδονία*, 1940a).

On the day of the national holiday, *Μακεδονία* hosts the announcement of the E.O.N. to the Greek people for the national celebration where the greatness of the Revolution and its exemplary character for all humanity is analyzed (*Μακεδονία* 1940b). In the main front-page article the newspaper links Agia Lavra, Dervenakia, Psara, Gravia, Tripolitza and the "divine" Messolonghi as places of giant battle of the Greeks since the battle of Salamis: an attempt to prove the consistent continuity of the heroic Greek nation through the heroic struggles (*Μακεδονία*, 1940c). The next day, six front-page photos from the parade show mainly motorized units of the Army, evidence of a contemporary and armed state, complementing the corresponding reportage (*Μακεδονία*, 1940d).

5. Conclusions

The celebration of March 25, the Independence Day of Greece, is emerging as an important event for Greece. Both in the capital and in the outskirts, the preparation of the celebration is under the auspices of the official state. As it is obvious, the newspapers take care to report the events, communicate them and comment on them. The standard rite of the holiday includes the performance of Doxology after the Liturgy, the formation of military units that will pay honors to the rulers, and the parade of the army and youth in front of the authorities. The fact that the celebration is part of the headlines shows that it is of interest to the Greek citizens, while at certain historical moments it is seen as a tool by the protagonists of political life.

The proclamation of the Second Hellenic Republic on March 25, 1924, a day that is otherwise an official holiday, shows that the holiday is part of the national and cultural heritage, it contains the concept of a start, a historical intersection, so it is chosen to combine the new political facts with the glorious past. At the same time, through the press, and depending on its ideological positions, the people are motivated or discouraged to

participate in the celebration in order to validate the popular legitimacy of every power exposed in the celebration: this mindset is permanent in the modern Greek state (Κουλούρη, 2012).

The commemoration of 25 March 1932 is significant as it imposes a new place of honoring on national holidays: the Monument to the Unknown Soldier, a monument that represents a dead ancient Greek soldier, at the base of the Parliament enlightened by the candle of Agia Lavra, the Monastery where the Greek Revolution began. This combination of Christianity, Ancient Greece and modern Greece illuminates how symbols of the past and present are combined to serve political goals. In an open, accessible to the public place, the celebration acquires corresponding characteristics, since the people have better contact and access to the main venue of official events (Κούκη, 2017). At the same time, (para)political groups find the opportunity to declare their presence and show themselves through publications that support them, showing that political protest on official holidays acquires a different dynamic (Στάθης, 2012).

Finally, the national holiday of March 25, 1940, completely controlled by the Dictatorship, confirms that the national holiday can become a conduit for the state to communicate its messages. The projection of the youth as “united”, “spontaneous” and “enthusiastic” embracing the heroes of the Revolution, and the image of Metaxas in public events as the forefather of the youth, constructs a strong relationship between the two members and reveals the public ceremony as a means of highlighting this relationship.

The government each time tries to control the celebration and direct the people to specific goals. It is a type of education in which citizens like to participate and show their support or displeasure with the government by participating in the events. The instructive and significant role of celebrating the national day can be seen by its connection with state changes, with the promotion of new rulers, new landmarks, new values that each government wants to support. Every government wants to be seen as a functioning part of the history of Greece and the stamp it puts on the celebration of the national holiday confirms this.

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